Gary James' Interview With John Lennon's Optometrist

Dr. Gary Tracy

From 1975 to 1979, Dr. Gary Tracy of New York was John Lennon's optometrist. Just recently Dr. Tracy's name was in the news when John Lennon's glasses, stolen along with other artifacts like John's diaries, were recovered in Germany.

Q - Dr. Tracy, it's been reported that you almost cried when you found out John's glasses had been found in Berlin. Did you think they had been lost forever?

A - No. I didn't even know that it was gone. I read an article and I guess it was stolen from Yoko, from the estate around around 2006. It was missing ever since. I didn't know that. I don't think anybody knew that, other than Yoko. Maybe they filed reports. What made me almost cry was just looking at those glasses and my prescription and my writing. I wrote "John Lennon." I wrote the date. It just brought back all those memories of those times. It was very emotional. He would carry glasses. I know a lot people don't carry a written prescription with them like that. It was folded up. Just to see my name and my handwriting was very emotional. It brought back a lot of good memories from those times.

Q - Before John Lennon came into your place of business, was it known for having a celebrity clientele?

A - Not really. I just opened up out of the blue. I was kind of a quiet, reserved person. I'm not flamboyant. I didn't know that much about business. I opened on sort of a whim. And it just so happened to be close to The Dakota, the closest place to The Dakota. And I did have celebrities, but I wasn't known for that. A lot of them were up and coming. The West Side was an up and coming neighborhood. A lot of people, aspiring actors would be waiters there. So, I'd examine 'em and later see 'em in a commercial or read articles about them. I didn't have a reputation for that at all. I always wanted to be a neighborhood place in a big city and the west side of Manhattan was known to have a neighborhood feel to it more than any other place in the city. It was a block over from where John lived, at 74th Street. They closed it every Thursday. They had volleyball games. Young people would come out and put up a volleyball net across the street among the cars and we'd play volleyball together. We'd play softball in the park on Sundays. It had a nice neighborhood feel to it. That's all I ever wanted to do, to be a neighborhood optometrist. I figured in New York, as busy as it is and as rude as people can be, that that would attract people, the neighborhood feel to it. I never tried to be an optometrist that treats celebrities. It just sort of happened.

Q - The story is that John and Yoko or maybe just John was walking down the street and stopped to look at the frames you had on display in your window. Would that be accurate?

A - Well, it was John and Yoko. I think it was a year after I opened. I opened in 1974 and it was in December (1975). It was dark and there were two faces in the window. I'm looking out and I couldn't see who it was. I just saw two people peaking in. They had their hands around their eyes. I think he was just checking it out. I was the closest one (optometrist). It was a professional looking place. It wasn't flamboyant. We didn't really have frames showing in the window then. So, I think he was just checking it out, seeing what it looked like. Here's an optometrist. I need my eyes examined. He approved of it, him

and Yoko, because the next night he came in asking for an exam. I was doing an exam around closing time and I heard that voice outside. "Can I get my eyes examined?" It was unmistakably John Lennon's voice. You don't have to be smart to put two and two together. They looked in the night before, but that was him out there. My receptionist was from Ghana, a middle-aged lady. I don't even know if she knew how important he was or about The Beatles. She just said, "I can make an appointment for you." And I said I'm not going to let him walk out that door. I'm going to see him right now. So, I left the appointment. I almost ran out of there. "Yeah, yeah. I'm almost done with my exam. I can examine you in a few minutes." "That's fine." That sort of started the relationship there.

Q - That's a nice story! And it's nice to be famous, to have a doctor accommodate you right away.

A - Yeah. For me, it was not as much the fame, it was just him. Back in the time I was just totally into the hippie movement, the peace movement, anti-war. I was just engrossed in that. He was such a representative in that. Everything he did with The Beatles. The songs he wrote, what he stood for. I loved Bob Dylan. I loved Phil Ochs. To me, John Lennon was the epitome of The Beatles. I wouldn't have done that for anybody. I always said if I could have chosen who I would meet in the world, he (John Lennon) would've probably been in second place.

Q - Who was first?

A - Bob Dylan. I always loved Dylan. I read every book about him. I identified with him so much. If I had to pick from scratch I would have probably selected Dylan. John Lennon is not a shabby second.

Q - Where was he getting his glasses before you? Did he ever say? Did you ever ask him?

A - No. I never treated him as a celebrity. I never acknowledged that he was a Rock 'n' Roll star, that he was an icon or anything. He was always a patient, a person. I know that the glasses he wore when he started with The Beatles were sort of a frame that was an English made frame. He just carried over. He sort of made that again iconic glasses, little round and off round shapes. So, he had plenty of them. I never asked him. I'm pretty sure from the time I saw him he probably got 80% to 90% of his glasses from me. I went back when I wrote a blog about him and took all his records out and I think in the four years that I saw him, I don't think three months went by without him being in the office doing a written transaction, buying glasses, sunglasses. "My temple broke. I want tinted glasses." If he bought glasses somewhere else, I don't know if he did or didn't. I just know I sold a lot to him in those four years. I have no idea where he got 'em from in England. I'm sure he got plenty of pairs before he saw me. He lived in the Village a couple of years before he moved up to The Dakota.

Q - I believe someone told me years ago he had two apartments. He used one of them, not in The Dakota, to conduct interviews.

A - Yeah, maybe a studio. I've kept letters and correspondence from The Dakota. Studio One it was called. It's a monster place from what I understand. It's possible there's a second place. I think he bought out another apartment. Whether it was all in The Dakota, that I don't know. Again, I didn't talk to him about personal things too much. We talked about the neighborhood and what are the good stores, what's happening and things like that. He used to come in and I think he did it on purpose around closing time, to pick up glasses and get an eye exam. So, he sort of locked the door. Then they'd (John and Yoko) sit and chat for awhile.

Q - Did you fit John with contact lenses?

A - No. He never desired those. I don't think it was a great experience for him. I don't think he was too successful with 'em. I know he had them and wore them in the past. He never asked me to fit him.

Q - You have a safe deposit box with John' old glasses and a pair of his frames. I would imagine they have some value. What are you intending to do with them? And what could you do with them? And could Yoko say, "Wait a minute Dr. Tracy, they belong to me."

A - I wouldn't do that (sell them). They just mean too much to me now. So, I don't have any thoughts of that. I do like having 'em. I have hand written notes from him, two different notes that he wrote to me. I have correspondence, "We have John Lennon's glasses ready." The frames are pretty much broken pieces of frames. I don't know how valuable they're going to be. I don't have lots of his frames or anything like that. I have no intention of selling those. Whenever we would change prescriptions I would keep the old lenses.

Q - Is true that Yoko Ono won't let you divulge Johns prescription and why would that be?

A - There's a good reason for that. Right now, it wasn't in play back then, there's HIPPA Rules, patient privacy. You're not allowed to reveal anything about a person, their medical history, their ocular history, anything. The other reason is if that prescription is out there, people can fake the glasses. They'll make up glasses and say they were John Lennon's glasses. I get asked many times a year to verify if glasses are his. I'll get an e-mail from England or even small towns in the United States that you've never heard of. "Oh, my dad has a pair of John Lennon's glasses. Can you please verify the prescription so we can say they're his?" I can't do that. Sometimes I'll ask the person to send the prescription and it's never been close. So many people think they have John Lennon's glasses and they don't have them. They're fake. Releasing that information, anybody can make fake glasses and they'd have the right prescription. So, that's the reason she doesn't want that out. She's pretty possessive of the estate, which is rightfully so. It's her stuff. It's her legacy.

Q - I can't let you go without asking about your Central New York connection.

A - I spent five years there. My dad was in the Army. My mom and dad were from Utica (New York). I was born there. Five of my best years were in Syracuse. I was in Germany, South Carolina. From fourth to eighth grade I was in Syracuse.

Q - What school did you go to? Do you remember?

A - Yeah. Fremont. I left just before high school. It would've been East Syracuse High School. Minoa was near by. I would've gone to Easy Syracuse High School if my dad had not been transferred to Hawaii. I was the co-valedictorian of Junior High School in Fremont. We only had eighty kids. It was a small area, but everybody would have gone to East Syracuse.

Q - Of course Utica, New York is best known for the birthplace of Annette Funicello and the brewery.

A - That's right. Actually I have quite a bond with a few patients from Utica. They come to me in New York City. And just coincidentally you never know who you'll meet in New York either. People sort of wander to New York, talented people. You know, when you're an Army brat and you live all over the world you lose you're sense of home. Where's home? To me it's still Utica and Syracuse, New York. They were the best years of my life, being close to relatives. It was the most stable part of my life. So, anytime I go up there these feelings fill me up. My God, this is home! Even though I haven't gone back up there to live or practice. I still get up there occasionally to see everybody. It's good feelings when I hear Syracuse. I was there when Jim Brown was the half-back. They won the championship. The number one ranked team. I used to listen to the Syracuse Nationals on my little transistor radio, Dolph Schayes. Really good memories from back then.

Q - What year did you leave Syracuse? Do you remember?

A - Probably '61, '62.

Q - In 1971 John and Yoko brought their art show, *This Is Not Here* to the Everson Museum in downtown Syracuse.

A - I was standing out in front of my store with John, right in front. He's getting ready to leave and we're just chatting. And I had a little upstairs, an unusable upstairs, and I kept a radio up there. Very faint. All of a sudden John said, "Is that Paul?" I thought it was somebody he knew named Paul. I didn't see anybody walk by. I said, "No." On the radio, Paul McCartney. We never mentioned anything about The Beatles. This little, low sound you could barely hear, he picked it right up. So, it just made me aware of how much attuned he was with The Beatles after they broke up. My friends opened up a flower shop two doors down. My friend asked John, "Can I ask you just one thing about The Beatles?" He politely answered or he didn't, but he never went back there again. I don't know whether that's why. I just wanted to treat John as a regular person. There's a very obscure book he wrote called *A Spaniard In The Works* with his poetry and drawings. I bought a copy a few years earlier before I opened my store, at a junk store for a quarter. After I knew John for about a year or two, I knew he was coming in and I brought it in. "Look at this book here." He said, "Oh, you've got this!" And he's thumbing through it. He had a good old time. I secretly hoped he would sign it, but I didn't ask him to do it. That was so out of character from the way I had with him, to get his autograph. It would've been worth a lot of money I think. It's just a memory of how much of a kick he got out of that. So, that's one of the other times I went out of character and mentioned something about The Beatles or his fame.

© Gary James. All rights reserved.

ClassicBands.com

Back To ClassicBands